



Paddock, J., Warde, A., & Whillans, J. (2017). The changing meaning of eating out in three English cities 1995–2015. *Appetite*, 119, 5-13.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2017.01.030>

Peer reviewed version

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[10.1016/j.appet.2017.01.030](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2017.01.030)

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# **The changing meaning of eating out in three English Cities 1995- 2015**

**Jessica Paddock, Alan Warde and Jennifer Whillans**  
**Sustainable Consumption Institute, University of Manchester**

## **Abstract**

This paper examines aspects of the experience of eating out in 2015 and its change over time. In 2015 we repeated an earlier study of eating out in three cities in England in with similar coverage of topics and mostly with identically worded questions, and conducted follow-up in-depth interviews with some of the respondents. We focus on the changing reasons and meanings of the activity as breadth of experience in the population augments and eating main meals outside the home becomes less exceptional or special. What we call 'ordinary' events have become more prevalent, and we delineate two forms of 'ordinary' occasions; the 'impromptu' and the 'regularised'. We describe the consequences for popular understanding of the social significance of eating out in 2015, its informalisation and normalisation.

**Keywords:** change 1995-2015, eating out, England, meal occasions, ordinary consumption

## **1. Introduction**

The use of restaurants and cafes has increased steadily over the last 50 years. Although modern life sometimes demands that meals be eaten away from home, the rise in eating out in the West is mostly a matter of discretion rather than necessity. This paper teases out the contemporary meanings of eating out. Reporting on the replication of a study conducted in 1995 (Warde and Martens, 2000), we contrast current practice with results from 20 years ago, focusing on 'ordinary' events.

While the sociology of food and eating has grown exponentially in recent years, the attention devoted to eating away from home is limited. Some excellent monographs describe owning and working in restaurants in the US, (Fine, 1996; Leidner, 1993) and the UK (Gabriel, 1988). Recent studies across Europe and the US tell more about up-market restaurants and their oft-times celebrity chefs (Lane, 2011; Leschziner, 2015; Rao Monin & Durand, 2003), but with limited information about customers. We know rather a lot about what is cooked and sold in restaurants and cafes across the globe, there being a special interest in the significance of the spread of commercial enterprises purveying different national, ethnic and regional cuisines and their connection with processes of migration (Berris and Sutton, 2007; Panayi, 2008; Ray, 2007, 2011). There is a minor interest in food connoisseurs in Canada (Johnston and Baumann, 2010) and a somewhat dated literature on

the more basic experience of eating out in Europe and the US (Finkelstein, 1991; Wood, 1995; Warde and Martens, 2000; Warde, 2016). These works show that eating out facilitates commensality and conviviality, with family and friends (see also Julier, 2013) and is a means to maintain social connections. In the words of Mary Douglas (1966), meals are sites to observe patterns of social involvement. The limited scholarly literature regarding eating out is supplemented by market research, which concentrates on identifying commercial trends across the UK market. For example, Mintel (2015) point to modest growth in the eating out market at 3.1% in 2015, to £34.5 billion, while the number of people deeming eating out as 'important' shows a downward trend. This, they suggest, along with a rise in number of fast-food/casual dining venues such as burger bars, pasta and pizza chains and heavy discounting by restaurants since the 2008 recession, contributes to what they call the 'casualization' of eating out. But it is not clear what those changes might mean for the general population.

One of the central findings of the earlier 1995 study (Warde and Martens, 2000) was that eating out was 'special'. Not only did people eat out on special occasions, as part of celebrations of anniversaries and rites of passage, but almost all events were considered an exception to the quotidian, a source of pleasure and a highly valued opportunity for social interaction. Warde and Martens (2000: 46-7) summed up what eating out typically meant in 1995 on the basis of discussion with interviewees as 'a specific socio-spatial activity, it involves commercial provision, the work involved is done by somebody else, it is a social occasion, it is a special occasion, and it involves eating a meal'. Importantly, 'eating out' did not include breakfast or snacks, it was associated with purchase in the commercial sector, and it was, in individual interviewees' words "'a change from the everyday'" and most typically "'a special occasion, dining, in a restaurant or a café, or something'" (ibid 45). This paper examines the extent to which main meals eaten out in restaurants remain special or extraordinary occurrences.<sup>1</sup> After describing our methods (section 2), we analyse data from the survey (section 3) and from qualitative interviews (in section 4) to explore why people eat out, how they view differences between occasions, and how they organise their meal schedules to fit their social obligations. Section 5 discusses the social significance of the 'normalisation' of eating out.

## **2. Methods**

This re-study of eating out behaviour uses three data sets. The first is a survey conducted over four weeks in April 1995 (n=1001) which examined, inter alia, the frequency of eating out at different types of restaurants, motivations and attitudes towards eating out in

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<sup>1</sup> Commercial establishments where a main meal might be eaten come in many forms. In the project survey we asked about restaurants, hotels, pubs, pizza houses, fish and chip restaurants, cafes, and many others. For ease of reference in the paper we use the generic term 'restaurant' to refer to all.

commercial establishments and in the homes of others, and social and demographic information about respondents. The sample was drawn from three English cities, Preston, Bristol and London (technical details of the methodology was published in Warde and Martens 2000: 228-232). The second, a repeat survey, also deriving from quota sampling, was conducted in the Spring of 2015 (n=1101) in the same three cities and asked many identical questions.<sup>2</sup> The design involved random location quota sampling of selected addresses for face to face interviews. Census Output Areas (OAs), typically comprising around 150 households, were selected at random in proportion to size and stratified by Census estimates of the proportion of residents in social grade AB. Quotas based on age and working status interlocked with sex were selected to reflect the demographic profile of each OA.<sup>3</sup> The social characteristics of the sample of respondents are summarised in Appendix 1. The third tranche of data arises from 31 follow-up, in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with respondents to the most recent survey, in each of the three cities. Interviewees representing a range of social characteristics and positions were selected from survey respondents who had reported that they were engaged to some degree in eating out, entertaining and cooking at home.<sup>4</sup> These interviews explored in more detail, among other things, understandings and experiences of eating out and the integration of their routines of eating out and eating at home. The characteristics of the interviewees are summarised in Appendix 2.<sup>5</sup>

The two surveys were amalgamated for purposes of analysis. Respondents aged over 65 were excluded from the sample in order that the 2015 sample matched the age range surveyed in 1995 (that is, 16 to 65); thus, responses from 973 respondents from 2015 and 1001 from 1995 remained which were analysed using STATA13. Respondents were asked to estimate the frequency of eating out in restaurants, pubs, cafes or similar establishments over the last 12 months and to describe in detail the last occasion upon which they ate a 'main meal' away from home.<sup>6</sup> Since the last meal out may have been taken at someone

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<sup>2</sup> The second survey was carried out by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) between March and May 2015.

<sup>3</sup> The quota fitted the proportion of men working full-time, men not working full-time, women employed and women not working to the composition of each OA population.

<sup>4</sup> Survey respondents who indicated that they never ate out at a restaurant or the home of a friend or relative or that they had no interest in food and cooking and who had not prepared the last main meal cooked at home were not approached for a follow-up interview. These criteria were imposed because we wanted to explore the relationship between eating out, eating at home and entertaining at home. We use the term 'respondent/s' when referring to survey data.

<sup>5</sup> This aspect of the research design in 2015 differed from the earlier study where qualitative interviews were conducted in advance of the survey and only in Preston, and used primarily as a resource for designing an effective survey instrument. We use the term 'interviewee' when referring to data collected via follow-up interview.

<sup>6</sup> The wordings of the questions were: 'Overall how often have you eaten out in a restaurant, pub, café, or similar establishment during the last 12 months, excluding times when you were away on holiday (in the UK or abroad).' and 'I would now like you to consider the most recent occasion when you had a main meal away from home. This may have been at a friend's or a relative's home or in a

else's home, only the proportion eaten on commercial premises are relevant to the focus of this paper; In 1995, 582 meals in a restaurant were described and in 2015, 723. There is room for ambiguity about respondents' understandings of the terms 'main meal' and 'eating out', but interview data suggested that neither was confusing, that the meanings were similar for respondents in both 1995 and 2015, and that responses to the survey questions were based on common understandings.<sup>7</sup>

The qualitative interviews were transcribed verbatim and, following several readings of the transcripts, were coded in a CAQDAS programme, Nvivo11. Features of main meals out revealed by survey analysis guided exploration of interview data in order to explore similarities and differences. Special attention was paid to the types of occasion described and the resulting experience.

### 3. Results

#### *Changing reasons for eating out*

Identical questions asked in 1995 and 2015, requiring respondents to estimate frequency of eating out in the last twelve months, produced very similar responses but showed only a marginal increase in the total number of occasions on which the population eats out in restaurants. Respondents' estimates imply mean frequency of eating a main meal out as approximately once every 17 days. However, for the purpose of identifying changes in the meaning of eating out the survey question probing the most recent occasion upon which the respondent ate out proved more valuable.<sup>8</sup> We report below on several aspects of these last occasions in order to explore changes and continuities.

Comparison across survey years indicates some significant changes portending informalisation and simplification of eating out in restaurants. Table 1 shows that respondents tend not to dress up specially for the occasion as much as they did 20 years ago. Neither are events planned as far in advance: there is a notable increase in deciding to

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public eating place, restaurant, pub, café, etc. Please exclude occasions when you ate at your workplace canteen or restaurant.'

<sup>7</sup> By main meal out interviewees understand that they sit down, to eat a meal, which contains at least one but often more substantial dishes, and which has equivalent status to what is in the domestic sphere usually called dinner. This template of eating away from home includes potentially many different types of events from take away food eaten in the street to a picnic. However, the term 'eating out' usually refers to a meal eaten, usually for pleasure, in commercial outlets like a restaurant or pub, where people sit down to eat at least one substantial dish usually selected from a menu.

<sup>8</sup> Equivalent data is not available for 1995, therefore the analysis of changing understanding of eating out is provided by inference from the survey results and from the interpretation offered in Warde and Martens (2000) regarding the meaning of eating out in 1995.

eat out one hour before or on the day of the meal and a decline in deciding several weeks or more before the occasion. Moreover, respondents are more likely to have returned to a restaurant previously visited (67 percent compared with 60 percent) and also more likely to report that they would go back again in future. This perhaps suggests that people are more likely to have favourite restaurants and are less concerned with visiting new or different restaurants. Meals are also simplified as one course meals became more common and three course meals much less common with fewer people having dessert and even fewer starters. Moreover, people now spend less time eating their meal when in a restaurant; meals taking less than one hour increased from 20 percent in 1995 to 35 percent in 2015. Finally, more people reported eating out alone and fewer people reported eating in very large groups.

Despite the apparent simplification of last main meals out, huge satisfaction with almost all aspects of these occasions persist. However, although the level of enjoyment expressed when eating at someone else's home increased marginally, satisfaction with commercial provision has declined on several dimensions. The survey asked 'please say how much you enjoyed each of the different aspects of this eating occasion', namely, 'the food', 'the company', 'the décor', 'the service', 'the conversation', 'the value for money', 'overall, the total occasion'. Contentment with the conversation remained constant. However, 'overall satisfaction' was 'liked a lot' by 82 percent of respondents in 1995 but by only 77 per cent in 2015, and the proportion liking food, décor and service 'a lot' dropped by 8-9 percent, and value for money by 14 percent.

**Table 1. Meal characteristics on last occasion and declaration that 'liked a lot' the different aspects of last meal in a restaurant, 1995, 2015 and change since 1995 (percentages)**

	1995	2015	Change
<i>Company</i>			
Ate alone	3	6	3
20 people or more	5	3	-2
Partner only	23	16	-6
Family only	29	35	6
Friends only	23	21	-1
Other combination	23	21	-1
<i>Dressed up</i>			
Yes	39	26	-13
<i>Day of the week</i>			
Weekend (Fri-Sun)	65	58	-7
<i>Decided in advance</i>			
Walking past	27	27	0
One hour	11	17	6

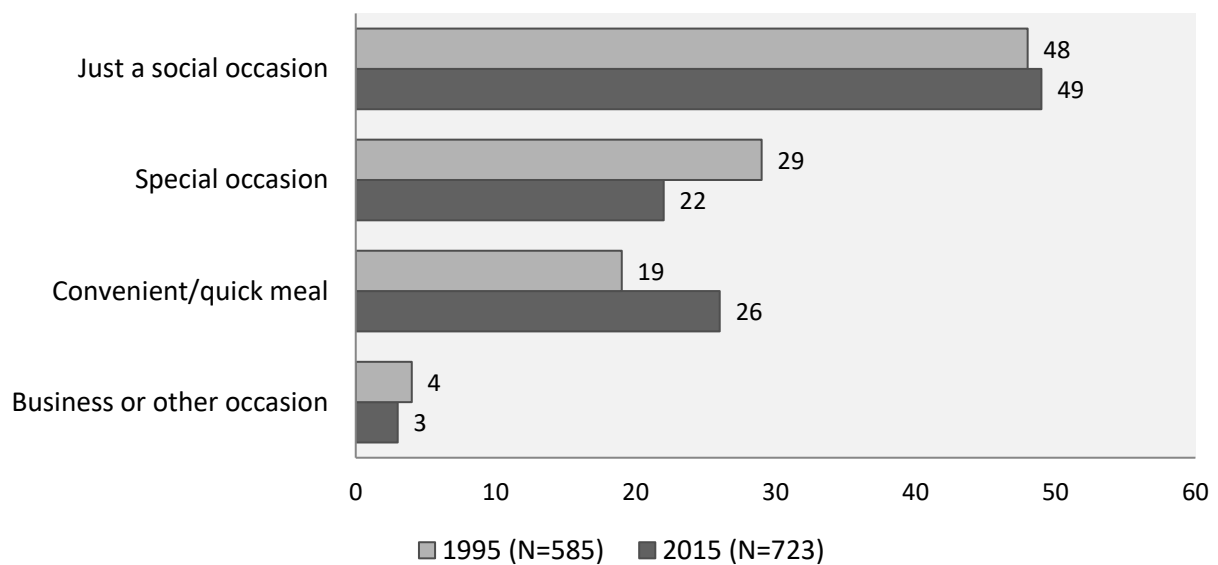
On the day	16	19	3
Several weeks or more before	14	7	-7
Duration			
1 hour or less	20	35	15
1-2 hours	45	48	3
2 or more hours	35	18	-17
Courses			
Starter	52	39	-14
Dessert	41	30	-11
One course	35	43	8
Two courses	32	35	3
Three course or more	33	22	-11
Returning customer			
Been before	62	67	5
Go again ('Very likely')	55	64	9
Satisfaction ('Liked a lot')*			
Food	81	72	-8
Company	91	86	-5
Décor	57	48	-9
Service	65	57	-8
Conversation	82	79	-3
Value for money	69	56	-14
Overall	82	77	-5

\*Survey question: 'How much did you enjoy ... ' offering five responses, 'liked it a lot', 'liked it a little', 'neither liked it nor disliked it', 'disliked it a little', 'disliked it a lot'.

Changes in the reason for eating out offer *some* explanation of the identified shift toward informalisation and simplification, and the downgraded enjoyment of eating out.<sup>9</sup> Respondents were asked whether the reason for their most recent eating out occasion was for (1) A special occasion (SpOc); (2) Just a social occasion (JSO); (3) Convenience/quick meal (C/Q); (4) Business meeting/meal; or (5) Other (specify). Figure 1 shows that between 1995 and 2015 the proportion of last meals in restaurants that were described as special occasions has fallen, the proportion described as 'convenience/quick' has increased, while the proportion which are 'just social occasions' and 'business' remains largely unchanged. The shift in restaurant meals has been primarily from special occasions to convenience/quick events.

**Figure 1. Reasons given for eating out on the last occasion at a restaurant (percentages), 1995 and 2015**

<sup>9</sup> 'I would now like you to consider the most recent occasion when you had a main meal away from home. This may have been at a friend's or a relative's home or in a public eating place, restaurant, pub, café, etc. Please exclude occasions when you ate at your workplace canteen or restaurant.



Looking at the characteristics of meals of these four categories indicates that they are distinguishably different types of occasion (Table 2). The company varies by reason for the meal occasion. Data from 2015 shows that C/Q meals are the most likely to be eaten alone (19 per cent of C/Q occasions); if not eaten alone, the company at C/Q meals are most likely to be family or partner only. Meals described as special occasions (SpOc) tend to be shared with a larger number of people, and 'just social occasions' were especially likely to feature only friends.

**Table 2. Characteristics of different meal types, 2015 (percentages)**

	Convenience/ quick	Special occasion	Just a social occasion
<i>Company</i>			
Ate alone	19	0	2
20 people or more	1	10	1
Partner only	22	10	16
Family only	31	47	32
Friends only	18	11	29
Other combination	9	32	21
<i>Dressed Up</i>			
Yes	7	62	21
<i>Day of the week</i>			
Weekend (Fri-Sun)	54	58	61
<i>Decided in advance</i>			
Walking past	43	10	25
One hour	26	4	18
Several weeks or more before	2	17	5



<i>Duration</i>			
1 hour or less	63	12	31
1-2 hours	30	52	54
2 or more hours	7	36	15
<i>Courses</i>			
Starter	25	53	40
Dessert	19	42	30
One course	61	27	42
Two courses	29	37	36
Three course or more	9	36	22
<i>Returning customer</i>			
Been before	76	62	66
Go again ('Very likely')	68	64	62
<i>Satisfaction ('Liked a lot')*</i>			
Food	66	75	75
Company	80	85	90
Décor	41	59	47
Service	53	62	58
Conversation	70	82	83
Value for money	54	60	55
Overall	69	85	78

- See note to Table 1.

The temporality and relatedly the composition of the meal also vary by type of occasion. For C/Q last meals respondents say that they decided as they are walking past or about an hour before, whereas SpOc last meals tended to be planned several weeks or more in advance. JSOs fall between the two. Respondents also spent less time eating at C/Q meals, where 63 percent took less than an hour compared with 12 percent of SpOc's, and 31 percent of JSO's; however, almost a third of C/Q meals took 1-2 hours indicating that convenience does not always imply shortage of time. The most prolonged meals are SpOc's, while JSO's, again, fall between the two. One explanation for the variation in duration of the meal is the number of courses consumed: C/Q meals are the most likely to comprise a single course and SpOc meals least likely. SpOc's are the most likely to contain starters and desserts.

Examining satisfaction with the different components of the meal by our four reasons for eating out revealed that, value for money apart, a C/Q meal was inferior on measures of sociability, company, conversation and overall rating. People were much less prepared to say that they liked such a meal 'a lot'. SpOc's, compared with JSO's, were 'liked a lot' in all aspects beside the company and conversation, presumably because special occasions bring in a wider group of people not necessarily known intimately by all in the party. Overall then eating out in restaurants meets with generally strong approval, but the C/Q type is generally least appealing. Thus declining satisfaction may be attributed to many quick and convenient

meals being taken in less congenial circumstances, in less smart surroundings and with more casual service or self-service than in 1995 and thus reducing the intrinsic pleasure of the occasion.

Comparison of meal characteristics *within* each of these four categories, between 1995 and 2015, reveals a broader shift. Even the most special of eating out occasions – SpOc’s – reflect these trends. There is a slight decline in large groups and fewer respondents dressed up for the occasion. SpOc meals are less likely to contain a starter (10 percent decrease) or a dessert (21 percent decrease) thus they tend to contain fewer courses than 20 years ago (a 13 percent decrease). Special occasions appear to mirror the same trend towards simplification as convenient and social events. The notion of having familiar ‘go-to’ restaurants is also reflected by SpOc meals in 2015, where slightly more had been to the restaurant before and also said they were ‘very likely’ to eat there again than in 1995. Satisfaction with all aspects of the SpOc meal has declined: the food, company, décor, service, conversation, value for money, and the overall experience.

Finally, we turn briefly to a separate set of questions on attitudes, which reaffirms a shift toward informalisation and simplification of eating out. The proposition that ‘I only eat out on special occasions’ found greater agreement in 1995 (by 10 percent).<sup>10</sup> In 1995, 32 per cent of respondents ‘strongly agreed’ with the statement ‘I would like to eat out more often than I do now’, a level falling to 16 per cent by 2015. Agreement with the statement ‘When I eat out I feel I am on show a little bit’ fell from 37 to 25 per cent. This implies that a greater proportion of people are comfortable and familiar in restaurants. More broadly, this shift may reflect the normalisation of eating out; that is, that eating out is increasingly incorporated into people’s daily lives as a mundane mode of food provisioning rather than being the preserve of more formal, special occasions.

In sum, the results of the 2015 survey suggests that while frequency of eating meals out on commercial premises has not increased much, the reasons for eating out and the nature of the experience have altered. The restaurant meal is somewhat less pleasing overall than in 1995, and is less exceptional an event. This impression is confirmed and enhanced by evidence from interviews which reveal some of the institutional, experiential and practical foundations for changes revealed by the surveys.

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<sup>10</sup> Responses to attitude questions were on a five point scale: ‘agree strongly’, ‘agree slightly’, ‘neither agree nor disagree’, ‘disagree slightly’, ‘disagree strongly’.

### *'Ordinary' meals out– distinguishing 'impromptu', 'regularised' and 'special' occasions*

Accounts of meals reported in qualitative follow-up interviews also suggest that dining out is less special than in 1995. Among many questions pertaining to domestic life, routines and habits, interviewees were asked to describe what a 'main meal' means to them and what counts as 'eating out'. This prompted accounts of both usual and unusual eating events in and outside the home, which were located in relation to the routines and rhythms of their daily life. What we call 'ordinary' meals out are contrasted with *special occasions*, which interviewees describe as related to events such as birthdays, anniversaries, the marking of a life event, or simply 'treating' oneself to a more elaborate dining out experience than usual, as with Arlie (London) describing a "posh restaurant". Such meals are often booked weeks or even months in advance and, for some, provide the opportunity to dress up more than is usual. For Douglas (London):

Well it's a memorable event, a special occasion. It's a chance to go out and do something that we all dress up a bit. It's nice. It means that none of [us] have to do the cooking and be slaving over a hot stove, it gives you a choice and a taste that you wouldn't normally have.

On these occasions, typically more than one course is ordered and rules of everyday eating temporarily suspended. Menus are sometimes perused online and a decision about what to eat made in advance (Penny, London). Such occasions are described in ways that suggest anticipation of both the meal itself and the atmosphere of the restaurant. For Simon (Preston) the special occasion might be a birthday or an anniversary, and involves going out with his wife for what he describes as a fine dining experience;

I suppose it's the experience of, you know, the level of service. I suppose it's the atmosphere. It's not being pressured. It feels like you're being I suppose waited on without being kind of hurried [...] I suppose it's got to be the [...] quality of the food and the drinks, [...] food that I know I can't turn out at home, you know, because for me if it's home cooking, then to me that's not fine dining.

The quality of the food and drink is more important on these occasions. While no one is ever content to receive poor quality of food while dining on any occasion, interviewees commonly refuse to accept disappointment with any aspect of a special event. The atmosphere and service is of equal if not greater importance, for it is an occasion out of the ordinary.

While special meals should be "memorable events", most of those described by interviewees are less exceptional. These 'ordinary' meals are shaped and inspired by myriad related practices and are unremarkable and un-exceptional; fewer are planned in advance, they are tied to everyday activities and they are related to everyday responsibilities like 'feeding work' (DeVault, 1991). They are more informal and also more affordable. Nevertheless, they are central to repertoires of eating and sociability. Several respondents across all three cities use 'special price menus' and dining out discount and membership

cards to discover deals and promotions and bring down costs. Angela (Preston) finds that pubs offer an affordable, convenient alternative to the 'nice restaurant';

My favourite would be a nice restaurant with nice food but just the way life is and things, it's not something we'd go to very often. We more regularly go to a pub kind of place which has nice food just for convenience I think. Really nice restaurants are expensive, so just time and circumstance, we just would more go to a nice pub out of the city. I suppose it's less informal as well. Because I suppose as well, what you pay, if you went to a really nice restaurant you pay so much more. So we would just go to a nice pub more than a restaurant definitely.

Miranda (Bristol) notes the transformation of many establishments that previously primarily sold drinks into places for eating informal and simple meals. One could argue that they offer a compromise between the 'nice restaurant' and the public house by combining dining room service with informality and what is relatively understood as inexpensive meals yet served with alcohol;<sup>11</sup>

So that's another thing, you know, pubs have become restaurants now and/or eateries. And quite often I think people will go there sort of seven o'clock and have a pint and a bite to eat, not necessarily always three courses, a lot more sort of, you know, whatever it is they do serve, meat and salad or whatever.

One uniting feature across all forms - the special and ordinary characterisations - is that interviewees consider all types of eating event enjoyable. It is not an obligation to eat out, and routinisation does not detract from pleasures derived. Asking Crispin (Bristol)<sup>12</sup> to explain what he means by eating out being a 'treat', he explains,

I don't know. I don't know. I think it's because we don't do it every day and the kids get to choose what they eat and it's sort of... it's seen as a bit of an occasion, so... and there might be nice food even. I don't think... it's not like it's an amazing treat, sort of like we all ... It's just something nice."

Meals out being "just something nice" rather than "an amazing treat" sums up the meanings of these less exceptional and less special meals. The changes identified by the survey - that eating out for special occasions has declined, while convenience and quick meals have increased in frequency - are corroborated. Two types of *ordinary* meal out can be detected, the impromptu and the regularised.

The *impromptu* meal out is not planned in advance and is a response to particular circumstances or events. It is a form of 'ordinary consumption' which takes place as the result of other daily life demands and does not necessarily involve overt conspicuous display

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<sup>11</sup> UK fast-food venues and cafeterias do not serve beer and wine as in many other European countries, such as Spain and Germany.

<sup>12</sup> Interviewees are referred to by name, followed by the city in which they were interviewed as a follow-up to the survey. All interviewees quoted in this paper were interviewed in Spring 2015.

(Gronow and Warde, 2005).<sup>13</sup> For example, hunger might strike suddenly, or the inclination to cook might be lacking, or there may be insufficient ingredients in the cupboard to make a satisfactory meal; in such circumstances the availability of meals in a nearby restaurant suggests an impromptu meal out. Pete (London) will eat out spontaneously if he is hungry and willing to give in to temptation, such as when he gave in to the smell of pie and mashed potato while shopping for a new pair of shoes. Isaac (London) reported that he uses digital technologies to locate a venue and make last-minute arrangements with dining companions.

Increasingly, communication technology facilitates impromptu events which might otherwise not occur. Without a smart phone to co-ordinate last-minute arrangements with multiple friends, or to check nearby provision and the availability of any promotions, a last-minute social meal occasion might have easily been 'something on toast' in front of the television. Mal (Bristol) lives alone and claims that meals are for him "a social thing" which he prefers to take in company. In this way, he will "call people and be like, 'come and have lunch with me'." Also several men described nights out in bars with their male friends, eating burgers or steaks in a pub or from an outlet 'en route' to the next venue. Edward (London) describes this as food to fill you up so that you "don't fall over". Echoing the survey results, Tyler (Preston) notes that a convenience or quick meal with his friends will often involve "just a main".

Sometimes I'll eat out with my mates but that's more of a burger and beers eating out. [...] Yeah, there's no planning. It might just be we're going for a couple of drinks and then go to a Wetherspoon's and get some food there because we fancy it. Or we might just be out and someone might fancy something to eat so we might go across. But that's more of a small portion rather than sitting down and eating a full three course meal. It's just a main really.

Commercial casual venues provide last minute opportunities and satisfy immediate requirements. As the landscape of provision has altered, with for example changes to the opening hours of kitchens in public houses, meals can be consumed away from home throughout the day and impromptu meals more readily be synchronised with other activities and other people.

Nevertheless, last-minute impromptu meals are not necessarily characterised by convenience or junk foods. They are often full-cooked 'proper' meals eaten at a commercial venue near to one's home (Murcott, 1982; Marshall and Anderson 2002; Holm, 2001). Tristan (Preston) eats out more "if it's a busy week". The local Italian restaurant – which he proclaims a dependable mid-week venue - presents a solution to problems brought about by working, commuting and having to arrive home with sufficient time and energy to

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<sup>13</sup> Although we note in Warde, Whillans and Paddock (forthcoming) that there are indeed cultural and social lines of differentiation in tastes for particular types and styles of cuisine.

prepare a meal. Better to take time to sit in each other's company and to "have a natter" (Enid, Preston), or discuss issues otherwise neglected in the flurry of activity associated with accomplishing day-to-day tasks (Edward, London). Interviewees speak of release from the labour of food preparation as well as other domestic obligations and chores competing for their attention. For example, Nicola (Bristol) explains that as she turns her mind to thinking about preparing the evening meal she will say to her self "'I can't be bothered, so let's go out.' It's just easier." Similarly Lara (London), who suffers with an on-going illness, does not always feel well enough to cook and instead takes her family out to a 'carvery' restaurant, making "sure that the family gets together". Labour is also avoided when Cheryl's (Bristol) husband convinces her it is not worth the effort unless their grown-up children visit as planned.

C: By the time you go and buy a piece of beef that's 10 pound. By the time you go and get all the veg, then you've got to cook it, then you've got to wash all up and it's 3 o'clock in the afternoon before you've done all that. He says 'well, we'll go have a natter, a lunch'. He says it's no more expensive.

Replacing the home-cooked with an impromptu meal in a restaurant reduces effort, cost and waste.

Being able to call into a restaurant on a whim to satisfy one's fancy in the moment might be considered a pure case of consumer freedom. However, despite occurring on the spur-of-the-moment, most such events are expected, reported as 'tending' to happen. They have happened before and are likely to happen again. Couples describe meals out with their children as part of a family day out of the house. It is time out together, where the meal removes the need to arrive home in time to prepare, cook and clean up after a meal. For Simon (Preston), stopping for a carvery meal extends the family Sunday out and allows him and his partner to return home ready to prepare for the week ahead. For Siobahn (London) meals taking place as part of a family day out enhance the potential enjoyment for all family members, because no one has to stay behind to cook.

Not all 'ordinary' meals out can be characterised as impromptu. Accounts are peppered with references to appointments made with family or friends. What we call *regularised meals* take place at intervals by agreement that this is how those living outside the household stay in touch with each other, or are said to have emerged over time as a pattern of sociability. For Gerald (Preston), "there's four of us usually go out together [...] friends of ours, we usually go out with them once a month or something like that, different restaurants". Such meals are not exactly routinized but take place with some regularity, albeit not always spaced at equal intervals. For Penny (London), lunchtimes and early evenings are key moments to eat out with friends who work nearby but who live at opposite edges of the city. It is a way to meet friends whom she would otherwise struggle to see. It also provides the

opportunity to take a proportion of her weekday meals in company rather than alone at home, which she manages to do at least three times per week. Planned social events are therefore, unsurprisingly, key features of regularised 'ordinary' meals out. While interviewees appear to derive great pleasure from these events, they are not special occasions. Describing one such event, Simon (Preston) reports that his wife and other married couples have an agreement to meet at least once every six months without their respective children being present. The opportunity to get out of the house and to socialise with friend is not confined to couples with children, for restaurants offer a space to meet up in ways that remove obligations of both hosting and being a guest. In another instance, now that her children have left home, Enid (Preston) prefers going to restaurants for regular sociable meals with her husband and their friends, which she previously would have catered at home. She can then enjoy all aspects of the occasion, including food which she has not had to prepare herself, for "by the time you've done everything and everything is ready, by the time you get to it you don't want it."

Sociability and friendship are central to accounts of regularised meals out, particularly among women. For some, meals out in restaurants are central to maintaining female friendships. Miranda (Bristol) recounts get-togethers with her female friends whom she calls her 'Thursday Girls'. These meetings tend to take place in restaurants, where one benefit is that she can taste cuisines her husband is reluctant to eat; "we've got lots of exciting things to try, unfortunately it doesn't always appeal to him, so I don't get to try them, but I try them with my Thursday Girls". Enid (Preston) similarly recounts going for a meal with 'the girls' once a month as a way of keeping in touch;

we go for a catch up about once a month because there's only four of us. So we just usually go to one of the local Italians just for dinner and that's it. See what's going on.

For Penny (London), her last meal out was on a Sunday afternoon in a pizza house with a group of female friends, as a 'get-together' – "we had quite a lot of catching up to do. It was relaxed, informal and probably the right sort of restaurant for us on Sunday". Indeed, the restaurant offers a space where women can relax (a word most commonly used by women describing same-sex eating out experiences), and where no-one has responsibility for hosting guests. It is an opportunity to spend time comfortably with each other without the routine domestic chores encroaching on time reserved for leisure (Gershuny, 2003; Sullivan 1997), where their tastes can be indulged without catering to the tastes of their families (Charles and Kerr, 1988) and where the social world of their table cannot be so easily interrupted by anyone other than waiting staff. Whereas the alcohol-centred night-time economy can be a sexualised space where women experience unwanted attention from other patrons (Sheard, 2011; Brooks, 2014), the restaurant offers an alternative.

#### 4. Discussion

Britain over the last twenty years has seen a shift towards people eating out on commercial premises more informally and routinely. While in 1995 exactly the same proportion of last meals were reported as being 'just social occasions' there was a minor increase in those allocated to the category of 'quick/convenient'. While the meaning of those terms probably has not changed, the substance of such events may have. Extended open ended interviews reveal distinct types of ordinary meals. These are structured differently and offer greater variation in social situation than special occasions. The ordinary dinner is occurring more often than 20 years earlier, the special less. Quick or convenient meals are especially likely to be unplanned, and perhaps embarked upon on the spur of the moment. This is partly because it is easier to eat more cheaply, which encourages more small events. The measured fall in the level of pleasure delivered by restaurant meals may result from them having become, smaller, more casual, and generally less elaborate. So although eating out is still highly esteemed, it is not reserved for special occasions.

As the collective experience of eating out in restaurants increases, ways to deal with it change. It becomes more normal and more familiar to more people. It becomes acceptable to stop off on the way home from work or while shopping to eat a meal (of whatever size). Indeed, eating out is at times considered to be economical in the face of cooking the same dish at home, suggesting that dietary norms might be maintained rather than broken by eating out for the sake of 'convenience'. As noted above, the roast dinner usually taken on a Sunday with family or household members may be taken outside of the home in a quasi-public setting should dining companions no longer be available. Or, if living alone, an outing might be arranged with friends in order to ensure companionship over a full meal rather than eating alone as a snack or intermediary meal of 'something on toast' or an 'omelette' (Noah, London).

Eating out in a more informal manner is more common than twenty years ago. The companies and marketers who sell commodities have, as so often, captured a social tendency in their own jargon, the 'casual dining restaurant'. As potential custom for unplanned and ordinary dining away from home increases, so the supply grows, and captures a bigger share of the market (Mintel, 2015). A lot of people find it more congenial now to walk into a restaurant to buy dinner than in 1995.

Arguably another main change in the last twenty years has been a growth in familiarity and knowledge of the practice of eating out among the population. Then, many older people



had only recent experience, for until the 1970's it had been uncommon for anyone on a moderate or low income to eat out except on holiday or at mid-day in the working week (Caplan, 1997; Jacobs and Scholliers, 2003). More people have more experience than in 1995. Thus the experience of eating out might still seem special, for even though it was almost as frequent as today it was not yet taken-for-granted. Another twenty years of regular and normalised eating out has meant that almost everyone is familiar with the activity. The practice has matured along with a population which has more or less a life-time of experience of eating meals out on commercial premises.

Given the pleasure derived from a practice which also offers a convenient solution to some day-to-day struggles in scheduling of competing practices, the replacement of meals prepared at home by eating out can be welcomed. While many interviewees speak warmly of meals cooked and eaten at home, eating out gives more time to spend with each other away from associated chores – it is 'time out with the family' (Karsten et al. 2013). Restaurants provide an opportunity for extended conversation and discussion among those at the same table. A restaurant meal may oil the wheels of familial and friendship interaction, giving an extended period of co-presence, an unusually extensive context for conversation, and probably a time spent more focused on mutual communication than is usual when distracted at home, especially for women (Sullivan, 1997). It might be seen as a high point of sociability and commensality (Sobal and Nelson, 2003), because there is no escape from extended interaction and conversation. That may be one reason for its appeal to those who live alone, but also for those who share family meals, for, as in 1995, family members or a partner are present in the majority of meals eaten away from home.

The café and the restaurant have long welcomed women as customers, but still in 1995 men reported eating out more frequently than women (see Martens, 1997). The reverse was the case in 2015. In neither instance was the effect statistically significant, but qualitative interviews attest to the importance of eating out for female friendships and sociability outside the home. A restaurant is a location where women may feel comfortable whether or not accompanied by men.

Avoidance of burdensome domestic labour and reciprocal social obligations - a responsibility still falling mostly to women (Meah and Jackson, 2013) - captures one especially meaningful aspect of eating out for women. Impromptu and regular social meals out represent convenient and rewarding ways to feed oneself and others. Competition and anxiety around domestic entertaining sometimes mars female friendships (Mellor et al. 2010), so eating out offers the opportunity for leisurely relaxation away from both domestic demands and the social obligations of hosting and reciprocity. It also gives women freedom from compromises often made in favour of the tastes and preferences of their partners and

children. Moreover, restaurants are relatively protected spaces where it is unusual for customers to be harassed by other clients. It seems likely that the cause is not so much that employed women have the financial resources to eat out more, nor that this signals the avoidance of cooking, but rather the acknowledgement that they deserve companionship and that a restaurant is a very congenial location for relaxed and uninterrupted conversation. The restaurant is becoming central to the management of women's friendship networks outside of the home, both for their own friendships and circles of friends shared with their partners.

The driving forces of change are not simply shifts in meaning. Increase in ordinary meals which are described as quick and convenient reflects the changing nature of market provision. There are more restaurants in total and greater availability of places designed for informal dining. Provision and patterns of consumption co-evolve. Nevertheless, there is also change in how events are approached. Eating a meal out continues to occur to celebrate special occasions in much the same way as before; such events are likely to be mildly ritualised, planned in advance, include a relatively elaborate meal and involve a core group of companions the selection of whom is not open to discretion. However, more events now diverge from this template. In 1995 most eating out events were considered 'special' regardless of their provenance, perhaps because eating out was still a relatively new experience for much of the population. A template governing a main meal out prescribed a format suitable to a socially special occasion. That template continues to define the ideal form of eating out but performances very often diverge from the ideal. Many of the last main meals eaten out in the commercial sector comprise only one course, eaten quickly, and without much apparent consideration given to the company involved. More people now seem aware of a greater range of purposes which might be served by eating out.

One axis of differentiation among ordinary meals is whether or not the same companions are involved on each occasion. Some impromptu meals involve companions who would in any case necessarily (in the socially imperative sense) eat together on that day. So the event is a means of coordination for these particular people, occurring occasionally though not at precisely predictable intervals. Many impromptu meals are not unexpected; couples decide that they are too tired to cook and so eat out instead – even if not on the same day each week; a family extends Sunday outings with the children by sometimes appending a meal even though there was no prior plan to do so. The impromptu event does not, however, necessarily involve the same people on each separate occasion. Sometimes it is merely an individual feeling hungry dropping into an immediately accessible restaurant, but it may also involve using a cell phone to rustle up companions at very short notice. There is no obvious expectation or obligation that these companions should eat together, and there is no easy

prediction about what sort of a venue will be chosen. This last type of event is perhaps especially new.

Although the boundaries are somewhat blurred, these two types of impromptu event differ from regularised meals because they involve less long term anticipation or planning. The 'Thursday girls' do not eat at precise intervals, but the same group assembles on a regular basis, and involves some sense of long term bonding. Other events – most obviously the large parties associated with ritual celebrations like a wedding or a Christmas dinner among colleagues, where a limited pool of people qualify for an invitation – are not defined by who turns up as the personnel is variable.

In conclusion, over twenty years the meaning of the practice of eating out has altered. It has become more ordinary as impromptu and regularised social meals provide alternative formats. The normalisation of eating out, partly steered by cultural intermediaries, alters understandings, and facilitates new opportunities for sociability. While the frequency of eating out has increased only moderately, the meanings of this shift potentially carry greater significance. Traditional sociability moves to new settings where women, notably, can relax and enjoy the freedom not only from cooking but also from other domestic tasks competing for their simultaneous attention. Practice has matured as diners adapt, via normalisation and specialisation, to a new phase of eating out in the UK as the understanding of the practice has matured, mellowed and spread. The process is slow but perceptible. As people eat out more, they begin to take it for granted. It becomes easier to go out more often. Permutations of special, impromptu, and regularised social meals fashion means to achieve commensality and conviviality. Crucially, the informalisation and normalisation of eating out do not signify its waning importance, but instead signal the shifting purpose and meaning of meals out of the home for English households.

## **Acknowledgments**

This research was funded by the Sustainable Consumption Research Institute, The University of Manchester and builds upon research undertaken in 1995 as part of an Economic and Social Research Council programme 'The Nation's Diet'.

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